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Conceptualising SMU : The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story, Oral History Interview with Arnoud De Meyer (Excerpt with Video)

Arnoud De Meyer

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Singapore Management University

Li Ka Shing Library

Conceptualising SMU: The People and Ideas behind the SMU Story

Interviewee: President Arnoud De Meyer

Interviewer: Patricia Meyer

Date: 13 January 2011

Location: Singapore Management University, Li Ka Shing Library Recording Studio

Note to Reader:

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Patricia Meyer: Today our interview is with Arnoud De Meyer, the fourth and current president of Singapore Management University. We're meeting in SMU's recording studio at the Li Ka Shing Library on Thursday, 13th of January 2011. I'm Pat Meyer.

Arnoud, you've just become president of SMU. We'd like to take this chance to get to know you and to learn about your views on university education in Singapore, and your aspirations for SMU. And I'd like to first start by stepping back to learn about your earliest contact with Singapore.

Arnoud De Meyer: My earliest contact with Singapore was in 1984. I used to work for an institution called INSEAD, which is a global business school located in France. And INSEAD had a Euro-Asia Centre, small centre that was doing both teaching and research in Southeast Asia mainly, in those days.

Then because of my interest in Asia, at some moment in time in 1995, the institution asked me to become the director of that Euro-Asia Centre, that particular centre that I was referring to before, which then brought me very often to this part of the world.

And that's when I started coming here more than on an occasional basis to do a bit of teaching or a bit of research. But when the board asked me to do a feasibility study for INSEAD—of what to do with these activities of the Euro-Asia Centre and with the activities of INSEAD in Asia—I remember in 1996 I took on that task from the board to do that feasibility study. I spent a lot of time in this part of the world, visited eleven cities, talked to the equivalents of the Economic Development Board in the different countries here, to try to figure out what to do. It all took a bit more time than we had hoped for, but in September 1998 we signed a deal between EDB, as a representative of the Singapore Government, and INSEAD to set up a campus of INSEAD here. So I came to live here in December of 1998, so that sort of gives my first exposure to Singapore.

Patricia Meyer: How do you see Singapore having changed over that time?

Arnoud De Meyer: I will answer that question on the educational scene and on the larger scene. So if I take first the larger environment—and I have been asked this question several times since I am back now for four months here in Singapore—I have boiled it down to four main differences. First of all, there're many more people here. The country has grown in number of people. And you feel that. I find it personally—I'm a city person—I find that actually attractive, that there is more buzz, there is more activity, there are more people around.

Secondly, you can see the investment in infrastructure, the physical appearance of Singapore has changed. And I'm not only referring to Marina Bay Sands or what's happening on Sentosa, but actually SMU, in the middle of the city, is a major change in the visual appearance of Singapore.

Third difference is something with which I have an ambivalent attitude to. That is, visually you see that this has become a richer country. You see more display of wealth. Is this because the country has become more wealthy or because people have become more

conspicuous consumers? It's probably a little bit of everything, but that's my third observation.

And the fourth observation is that it has been a place with a lot of buzz. There's a lot more cultural activity, arts activity, and of all types. It's not only that I like classical music, but it's not only that the SSO [Singapore Symphony Orchestra] has improved in its performances, but it's at the same time, there is much more jazz. Some of the top singers of the world pass through, partially because of the casinos I suppose, but there are all kinds of activities. And also the investment that the Government makes in education for arts, it has changed considerably. So that is very different. And this last remark leads me then to focus more on the educational scene.

The three universities, SMU, NUS [National University of Singapore] and NTU [Nanyang Technological University] have changed dramatically. SMU, obviously, from nothing to what it is today. But also NUS and NTU have transformed themselves into clearly world-class institutions, or institutions that play on the world's scene whose research is recognised by people elsewhere in the world. It's interesting for me to see how eager some academics are to come and work here, something that was not the case in 1998, 1999, when I had to convince faculty from INSEAD to come and work here. But now it's much easier to say, why don't you come and spend part of your career as an academic in Singapore? So there's been a dramatic change in the educational scene. And obviously the creation of the fourth university, SUTD [Singapore University of Technology and Design], and then the fifth institution, SIT [Singapore Institute of Technology], that attracts foreign universities here—it all builds up into a much more vibrant and forward-looking educational scene. I was saying earlier that in the '90s, I thought that the higher education here was relatively middle-of-the-road, good quality, but to train local people at middle level, and the elite were going abroad. What I see now is the elite from elsewhere coming to study in Singapore. Some of the elite researchers in bioengineering or mechanical engineering, or whatever, nanotechnology—they're coming here to Singapore. It is a dramatic change in the educational scene which I think is very good for us as SMU.

Patricia Meyer: In the past you've talked about the need for schools for business rather than business schools. Can you just tell us a little bit more how SMU could be such a school for business or a university for business?

Arnoud De Meyer: Let me backtrack a little bit to answer that question and go back to the last twenty years of business education. Now we focus on business education. I keep on saying that between the late '80s and 2008, let me decide to put it that way, business schools all over the world have had a ball. Nothing could go wrong for them, for many reasons. But probably the most important one is that we have seen in the '80s in many countries—but perhaps the most visible with Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the United States—a transformation of society, whereby business became more important, and where business was seen as the leader in society. I'm old enough to have studied in the '70s of the previous century and I remembered that in those days, business was not that good. My own family, my own father—when I told him that I was going to study business—looked quite worried. And he was a civil servant and he was convinced that service for government was what one needed to do, and going into business or studying business

was seen or looked upon with a sort of hesitation.

We've seen this major transformation in the '80s whereby society as a whole—and again I put as black and white—but society in whole had a lot more belief in what business could achieve, believe very strongly in entrepreneurship, saw business as a role model and was in many cases saying the way we organise government should be similar to the way businesses are organised with objectives and key performance indicators, and the way you organise government—society can learn from how business is organised. So it became natural that business schools were good for you. And that the best and the brightest wanted to go and study in business schools. And that business schools could charge almost anything as tuition fee because it was almost sure for people who would graduate out of a good MBA programme that they would have the right return on investment. We have had a ball.

This has changed over the last two, three years, precisely because of the financial crisis and some of the excesses that we've seen in business. And perhaps because not all of the ideas that came out of business worked so well in government—and I lived the last four years in the UK and I've seen what Tony Blair has and then his successor have tried to do in the government. And maybe not everything that they've tried to do, in terms of having a business orientation in government, has worked that well. But it's clear that the financial crisis has put some question marks around the value of business for society and today we need to much more justify the role of business in society. For business schools that means that quite a few people have asked questions about business schools and the role of business schools. And how come that business schools, who were seen as being the training ground for the elite, then produce people who seem to get victims of these excesses and do things that you shouldn't do et cetera. There have been a number of questions there.

But equally important is that because we were so successful as business schools, we isolated ourselves. We thought that we knew what society needed. And thus we define business as a combination of marketing and operations and finance and accounting and a bit of strategy and whatever and say, "This is what business needs to know and this is what society needs to know." And I think business schools have in general not listened enough to what society really needs or even what businesses really need. And that's the reason why I use this phrase, "We need to move from being a business school to a school for business." And what I mean by a 'school for business' is listen much more carefully to what society needs or organisations need and try to come up with solutions. Even if these solutions are not in the traditional disciplines of a business school.

And I take an example, which I only know from the press so I have no privileged insights in it, but when we take the example of the major oil spill of BP in the Gulf of Mexico, it was interesting for me to see how BP originally defined it as a technical problem— "We can't stop the well"—and didn't see that it at the same time was a societal problem, an environmental problem, a big PR issue. It was a relationship of a British company—it was interesting to see how BP suddenly was called British Petroleum again—so they had a geopolitical issue in United States. And then it was a much more complex issue. The solution for that problem—which is a very difficult one and I'm not saying that I have a solution for it or that I would have been better at managing it—but it was clear that the solution, the leadership that was required to manage that problem needed to find ideas in

sociology, in political science, yes, in the technology, but also in pure management and leadership. That they needed to have components of solutions that would fit together, that could be assembled together, and that—in terms of where it had to come from—went much beyond what a traditional business school is doing.

Now that's where SMU is sitting in a great place, because we have many of the building blocks that are needed to respond to issues around energy, sustainability, global warming, diversity in the workforce, or all kinds of other issues that organisations are confronted with. By the combination of social sciences, economics, information systems, pure business management, and accounting,

And law, yes. We have many building blocks whereby if we listen carefully to society we can come up with integrated solutions. That's the reason why, if you would look at some of the early speeches and early interviews I gave as a president, I have been hammering on interdisciplinary efforts. I always am careful, I believe in disciplinary research, and I believe that you can do very good research based in the disciplines and, but there is a lot of value in bringing these building blocks together and providing answers to society that recognise the complexity of the problems and don't try to bring it back to one single item of what we have to offer. So SMU is uniquely well-positioned if we can keep that integration between the different schools that we have to be a leading institution in the world.

And that brings me back to an earlier question that you had about the change in educational scene here in Singapore. I think we had had a watershed, and it's a bit of an easy word to use, but until now, the Singapore educational institutions could learn from their counterparts elsewhere in the world. They were—I've sometimes used the word, apprentices—of what was happening elsewhere in the world. And it's clear for, example, that SMU has learned a lot from Wharton, and that we're still learning a lot from CMU, from Carnegie Mellon, in information systems. At the same time, I also see that NUS has learned a lot from MIT, from its collaborations with other institutions, and I could go on like that. We have been, when I talk about SMU and I will limit it to that, we've been an apprentice. But we've learned a lot, and there's a moment where you have to take your responsibility and say, "We've now become a partner that can contribute to others in the world." And that is a subtle but very important change in the educational environment here in Singapore. That is that we've become partners for the rest of the world, partners for some of the best institutions in the world, and we will have to develop together what the university of tomorrow is.

And that's where my 'from business school to school for business' comes in. A new view on what a business school can be, a new view on how you respond to the challenges and the questions that society has and how we as educational institutions, higher educational institutions and universities, react to it. We are in the...we have become a university that's in the driver seat, that has to come up with its own ideas.

Patricia
Meyer:

I'd like to just expand a little bit more on what you touched on earlier about SMU's role in the community. How would you like to see that develop?

Arnoud De Meyer:

We have the enormous advantage of being a city campus, being here in the centre of the city and thus being a visible presence of an academic institution. Visible for everybody, everybody knows the buildings of SMU at the end of Orchard Road. Perhaps we haven't really exploited and leveraged that position as well as we could, in terms of having impact on the business community. We are a university for the world of business. We're not a business school—we're a university, but for the world of business with the different components that I referred to a little bit earlier. We can make a difference in the way people manage, whether it's in business, whether it's in government, whether it's in NGOs. For example, in NGOs, what the Lien Centre is doing is very important, in my opinion, in trying to influence the quality and the professionalism of management in NGOs. And I hope that in the long term we will be successful in influencing them.

My first point about society and SMU is that we need to take our research and see how relevant that is to businesses and see how we can influence the way they think and they work. That's not going to happen automatically. We need to make a serious effort in communicating that. And that's one of the reasons why I come back to that—we haven't probably leveraged our closeness to business or to government or to some other organisations here around us, that we haven't completely fully leveraged that to influence them, to communicate what we're doing in terms of research. We also need to use much more social media to communicate the results of our research. And not only from the faculty but also some of the great ideas that some of the students have. I've seen some student papers that I was really very impressed with and I thought—we need to make sure that this is known by the community around us. So that's the first point, that is, communicate better through our physical presence, but also through social media and anything else that can help us communicate better, the results of our insights of our research.

The second way that we relate to society is through our students' and staff's and faculty's community service. As we all know, our students are required to do eighty hours of community service but many of them do a lot more. And we celebrated in September a million hours of community service, which is when you think about it, impressive as a university, a small university. But I would hope that through that community service and what students learn there, they get an attitude of helping the communities in which they work for the rest of their life, so that we can educate our students in continuing their education, so that they feel that as citizens they have a responsibility to the society in which they work and have to give back to the community. And this goes beyond our students. It's faculty, staff, but also our alumni. And I would be very happy and I see that some of that is already happening, where alumni and the students are working together on some of these community service projects. So I hope that again is something where we can influence society.

And the third one is something about the holistic experience that we provide to our students. Our educational system is one where we provide a holistic experience to the students, where we tell them, yes, you're studying accounting or you're studying business or information systems or law, or whatever you're studying that—but then at the same time you should understand what's going on, a little bit of what in the other schools is going on. You should understand how your domain fits in the broader world of business. And at the same time we stimulate our students to participate in the CCAs [co-curricular activities], do some cultural work or some sports or whatever. So we provide a holistic

experience. I would hope that students go away from here and keep that holistic attitude and that I think that will have an influence on society, that society is not a collection of a bunch of silos but society's about interaction, integration. And I would hope that one of the ways SMU can influence society is through our alumni who will keep that attitude of thinking broadly, thinking in an integrated way and perhaps influencing the way their colleagues and their organisations in their communities in which they work.

Patricia Meyer: In closing I would just like to ask you if you have any advice for SMU students.

Arnoud De Meyer: I've been telling our students, because I have regular lunch with a smaller group of students and they always ask me that question, "Professor, given your— they don't say, given your age—they say given your experience what do you have to tell us?" And my answer is a university education is something that we build together. A university offers opportunities. A student has to take some of the opportunities but also shape those opportunities in what he or she wants to do with it. We're not a restaurant where you sit and you see a buffet and you can just take and eat. We are more a restaurant where you still have to do a bit of the cooking yourself, where you have to shape your own education yourself.

And so my advice to students has always been three-fold. First of all, we are not a cookie-cutter training machine that will turn out or churn out identical students every year. But what we are is an environment in which there are lots of opportunities, there're probably too many opportunities, and you will have to make trade-offs, but choose those things that you feel make a good education for yourself.

Secondly, I tell students that my personal experience is that my student years were the years where I could experiment with leadership on a very small scale—in the clubs or the political organisations I was in as a student. You can make mistakes, you can experiment, you can simulate what leadership, taking on responsibility, really means. And when I look back—and of course I have evolved a lot over the years in the way I look at the world, the way I look at organisations, I've gotten a totally different perspective by being a president obviously again—but fundamentally some of the values I have about leadership go back to the time I was at university when I could try out things. So that's my second advice, that is make sure that if you are four years at this university, that you grab the opportunity to hone, maybe honing is too strong, but at least to develop a little bit your leadership skills. Try out what your style of leadership could be. So that's my second advice.

The third advice is undergraduate education is not preparation for a job—even professional schools like the law school or the accounting school, where yes, you go into a particular profession—it is still to a large extent the preparation that opens up your mind, that creates options for you, that enables you to do many different things. I studied engineering and yet I am not in a job that is an engineering job. But I still think when I was studying engineering, I had a very broad view of what I wanted to do, and the engineering studies I did—I saw it more as an opportunity to create options for myself.

So that's the advice I would give to students. That is, education is something you make yourself, and there will be trade-offs to be made. You can't do everything here and don't

be worried about it. We offer you opportunities, build your own education. Two, it's an opportunity to hone your leadership skills, and three, see an undergraduate education as broadening your options, not as narrowing yourself down to one particular job.

Patricia
Meyer:

Thank you very much.

Acronyms List

Acronym	Definition
BP	British Petroleum
CCA	Co-curricular Activity
CMU	Carnegie Mellon University
EDB	Economic Development Board
EMBA	Executive Master of Business Administration
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HDB	Housing Development Board
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MNC	Multinational corporation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NUS	National University of Singapore
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PR	Permanent Resident
SIT	Singapore Institute of Technology
SMU	Singapore Management University
SSO	Singapore Symphony Orchestra
SUTD	Singapore University of Technology and Design
UK	United Kingdom